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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 PARAMARIBO 000343

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SUBJECT: INCREASED VENEZUELAN ACTIVISM IN SURINAME HAS  
MIXED SUCCESS

REF: A) PARAMARIBO 175 B) PARAMARIBO 286 C) PARAMARIBO 155  
D) 05 PARAMARIBO 723 E) 05 PARAMARIBO 414 F) 05 PARAMARIBO  
527 G) 05 PARAMARIBO 687 H) 05 PARAMARIBO 783

Classified by Ambassador Marsha E. Barnes, reasons 1.4 (b)  
and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Venezuela's profile in Suriname is on the rise thanks to economic initiatives such as PetroCaribe, a joint Cuban-Venezuelan health care assistance program, and a steady public relations campaign by its Embassy over the past year. Despite this heightened engagement, Venezuela's activism is not blindly well received, however, as some recognize the more obtrusive edges of PetroCaribe or are otherwise disappointed by supposed largesse. Local media also carry unvarnished views on conditions in Venezuela with some regularity. By positioning himself as defender of the less developed countries in the hemisphere, GOV President Hugo Chavez strikes a chord with many Surinamers who bristle at perceived outside interference by larger, richer countries in their affairs. Surinamers, though, typically center their passion against the Dutch and not the U.S. Venezuelan activism here will likely further increase, and if Chavez ramps up aid to Suriname, his ability to influence may well follow; NDP opposition party leader Desi Bouterse is already a fan. End Summary.

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ECONOMIC TIES: PETROCARIBE AND FISHERIES  
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¶2. (C) Venezuela's most high profile initiative in Suriname is the PetroCaribe agreement. Implementation, however, appears further off than officials from both sides are publicly claiming (See ref A). Some GOS officials are concerned that it will lead to increased political indebtedness to Venezuela, according to Terrence Craig, Head of the Americas Desk at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). The Finance Minister is reportedly uncomfortable with the increased debt levels resulting from PetroCaribe's financing scheme and a GOS proposal to use its proceeds to create a social fund designed to provide low interest home mortgages. The director of the state oil company, Staatsolie, has serious reservations about the role his enterprise is expected to play, as it would be positioned to be a storage and transport facility,

undermining its business model to grow as a supplier.

¶3. (C) In its impatience to complete the PetroCaribe deal, Venezuela is refusing to renew a 1986 fisheries agreement that expired in June 2005 until a PetroCaribe delivery schedule is finalized, according to Craig. Specifically, the GOV is declining to sign a fuel clause allowing low cost Venezuelan fuel for Surinamese fishing vessels until Suriname commits to PetroCaribe's final steps. Craig said the GOS is dismayed at this negotiation tactic even as the GOS seeks to restructure the fisheries agreement to make it more beneficial for Suriname, which, according to critics, has received very little from the deal.

¶4. (U) The GOV paid for 15 Surinamese import companies to attend the South American Conference on Trade and Investment held in Caracas from May 15-19, aimed to explore commercial opportunities and ease interregional South American trade. An additional 45 companies were invited to attend at their own expense.

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POLITICAL RELATIONS SOLID, BUT DIFFERENCES REMAIN  
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¶5. (SBU) Political ties between the GOS and GOV can be considered solid, but neither side sees the other as a primary partner. Craig said deepened political cooperation still awaited the renewal of a formal bilateral consultation mechanism that has been defunct since 2002. In public statements on his country's political relations with Suriname, GOV Ambassador to Suriname Francisco Simancas emphasized Venezuela's backing of Surinamer Albert Ramdin's successful drive to become Assistant Secretary General of the Organization of American States (OAS) along

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with help provided to Suriname in its bid to join the Community of South American Nations. Pending topics of discussion include Suriname becoming a signatory to the CARICOM-Venezuela cooperation agreement, the establishment of a direct flight between Paramaribo and Caracas, and the proposal to build a city square in honor of Simon Bolivar in Paramaribo.

¶6. (U) Suriname and Venezuela appear to be at direct odds concerning the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), which Suriname supports and Chavez actively opposes. Surinamese President Ronald Venetiaan said late in 2005 small economies have less luxury to engage in debate that delays successful integration than countries with large domestic markets like Venezuela (and Brazil and Argentina).

¶7. (C) Ideologically, the populist politics of President Chavez resonate with the long ago leftward leanings of many in Suriname's current leadership who still view strengthening South-South relations favorably. Entering the fold of Chavez's Bolivarian Alliance, though, is not on the GOS agenda. Chavez does have an ideological ally in Desi Bouterse, the leader of Suriname's single largest opposition party, as well as a former military dictator, murder suspect (See ref C) and convicted narcotics trafficker. Bouterse, who sent Chavez a personal letter of congratulations after the 2004 referendum, has a large poster of Chavez hanging prominently in his office with the quote Against Imperialism for a Free Venezuela, seen recently in a front-page newspaper photo.

¶8. (C) A Bouterse confidant privately claimed just before the May 2005 election that if Bouterse's NDP party were to win, he would align Suriname more closely with Chavez. Bouterse supposedly made a number of trips to Venezuela to secure financial support for his 2005 election campaign, despite an outstanding Interpol warrant for his arrest. Fears of possible Chavez support to Bouterse and his party in the run up to Suriname's next election may drive the GOS

to accommodate Chavez more than it might otherwise, lest it lose its already slim parliamentary majority.

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HEADLINES FOR FREE EYE CARE PROGRAM AND DISASTER ASSISTANCE  
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¶9. (U) A joint Cuban-Venezuelan program to provide free eye treatment and surgery for low income Surinamers has been garnering positive headlines for both countries since it began in October 2005. (See ref D). The Venezuelan Embassy provided key financial and logistical support in the initial stages of the program, although with the recent opening of a Cuban Embassy, it is not clear that Venezuelan role will continue.

¶10. (U) During Suriname's recent flooding disaster, a GOV delegation arrived to great fanfare to assess needs then left the next day without making a commitment. Eventually, the GOV donated 20,000 barrels of fuel for planes, helicopter, and boats. It also reportedly plans to donate 14 tons of humanitarian supplies, including rice, children's clothing, medicine, tools, school supplies, and an electric pump.

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HITS AND MISSES OF VENEZUELAN PUBLIC RELATIONS CAMPAIGN  
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¶11. (SBU) Through public relations and cultural outreach, the GOV has been raising its profile and spreading Chavez's message in Suriname, especially since the arrival of public relations coordinator and former Al-Jazeera employee Herminia Fernandez one year ago. (See ref E). Upon her arrival last year, Hernandez said the GOV would conduct journalist training, but to our knowledge, no significant formal trainings have taken place. There are increased numbers of press releases and newspaper articles covering or promoting Venezuelan positions, projects, and events. One paper ran a GOV press release in February justifying the Venezuelan vote against the IAEA resolution concerning Iran's nuclear program.

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¶12. (U) The Venezuelan Embassy's largest print propaganda effort is a glossy 2-4 page color English language newspaper dubbed The Venezuelan Emblem. It features articles praising Chavez and his policy achievements and criticizing the U.S. and Chavez's domestic political opponents. It also highlights Venezuelan activities in Suriname, such as optimistic predictions for the closing of the PetroCaribe deal. The Embassy sponsors a 30-minute Spanish language radio and TV program bi-weekly on four local broadcasters named Venezuela Presente, which covers political, economic, and social news with a Venezuelan slant.

¶13. (U) Venezuela's relatively large cultural center is popular among Surinamers and a significant part of the GOV's public diplomacy outreach. The center offers inexpensive Spanish language, dance, and art lessons, and often hosts art exhibitions, sport competitions and film festivals. The Venezuelan Embassy in Suriname also has a newly designed website, [www.suriname.gob.ve](http://www.suriname.gob.ve), to promote its efforts. The website houses biographies of the Ambassador and DCM.

¶14. (U) The GOV suffered a public relations setback when local media reportedly widely on a Surinamese delegation's nightmare experience at the August 2005 World Youth Festival in Caracas. (See ref F). Delegates returned home bitterly complaining to the press of horrible logistics failures and the propagandist and pro-Chavez political nature of the conference, saying they felt duped and misinformed. Despite their bad experience, Suriname's youth

representatives are not adverse to further offers of training and travel. For example, out of the ashes of the festival, grew an exchange program between the Venezuelan state of Carobobo and Suriname.

¶15. (SBU) Other public diplomacy setbacks for Venezuela include the occasional sharp editorial enumerating the failures of President Chavez's government in print media (See reftel G), and a documentary-style series on Venezuela with quite negative factual commentary on the country's social and economic situation on local TV.

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LAW ENFORCEMENT AND MILITARY COOPERATION  
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¶16. (C) There is very limited cooperation between the GOV and GOS in the law enforcement realm. Our police and prosecutorial contacts complain of a lack of Venezuelan aggressiveness in combating the flow of narcotics through the region, and some see Venezuela as the region's weakest law enforcement link.

¶17. (C) Military cooperation between the two countries remains limited to exchanges and training, but is expanding. Pilot training on Casa 212 aircraft to members of the Surinamese air wing is planned for later this year. The first Surinamer graduated from the Venezuelan Military Academy in 2005 and Suriname has another spot this year. The GOV offered a Coast Guard development assistance program for two years in a row, but the GOS deemed the GOV plan inappropriate for Suriname because it was based on Venezuela's own civil authority system. (NOTE: A U.S. military delegation also recently visited Suriname for consultations on possible USG assistance in developing a Coast Guard or other maritime enforcement presence. The Dutch have held discussions on and off with Surinamese over the last several years regarding establishment of a Coast Guard. End Note.)

¶18. (C) Venezuela's armed forces took center stage during Suriname's 30th independence anniversary in November 2005 with paratroopers parachuting into the middle of the main ceremony. (See ref H). Chavez was supposedly scheduled to attend, as he had in 2000, but canceled at the last minute. Surrounding the festivities, Venezuelan Defense Attache Orlando Alvarado Osorio decorated the Commander of the Surinamese Armed Forces, Colonel Ernst Mercuur, with the Venezuelan army's second highest honor for his service and

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professional achievements.

¶19. (U) In December 2005 parliamentarian Ruth Wijdenbosch, a senior member of President Venetiaan's NPS party, in speaking about her opposition to Suriname's signing an Article 98, said that if Suriname were to lose U.S. military assistance, she would push for closer ties with Venezuela, Brazil and Argentina to replace U.S. cooperation.

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COMMENT  
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¶20. (C) By positioning himself as a hero of independence and a leader willing to stand up to bigger, richer countries, Chavez appeals to Surinamers, many of whom resent their former colonial power, the Netherlands, and would like to see more Chavez-style rhetoric and actions employed against it. This admiration for Chavez is more visceral than intellectual. Suriname is likely to remain receptive to increased Venezuelan engagement, hoping that it will lead to cheap oil and assistance, both financial and materiel. Surinamers are not uniformly unsceptical, however, and the case of PetroCaribe shows that Venezuela

may face some resistance from those leery of deals with strings attached. Under the current government, it is not likely that Suriname's increased engagement with Venezuelan will mean a deterioration of relations with the U.S. Given the close ties of Bouterse, the leader of the largest single party, the government may feel a need to watch its flank and take a more flexible approach to ties with the GOV.

BARNES